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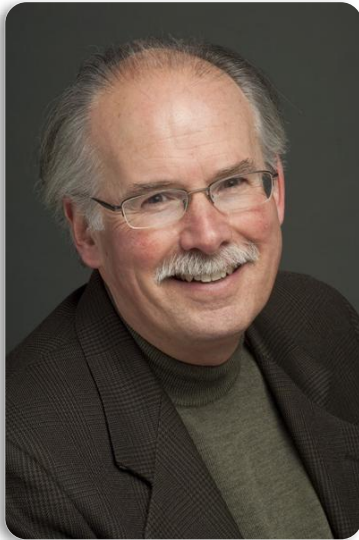
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Media Relations

Op-Ed On Civility Available From UNH Professor

January 10, 2011





Bruce Mallory


Statement on Violence and Civility in the Wake of a Massacre


Bruce Mallory
University of New Hampshire
Durham, New Hampshire


The violent rampage that took place in Arizona on Saturday is yet one more reminder, if we needed one, that our claim to be a civil society, in which we solve our differences through informed debate rather than random acts of violence, is an ideal that we have not fully achieved. A civil society, one based on the principles of a pluralistic democracy, creates opportunity for the constructive expression of difference and dissent. A civil society makes it possible for those with opposing views to engage in informed, respectful deliberation, where the argument is about ideas, not about the people who hold those ideas. A civil, democratic society places its trust in those it elects to make the hard choices necessary to solve complex problems. A civil society is one that is based on laws, not on the actions or threats of individuals.

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While it seems that the perpetrator of Saturday's shooting of Congresswoman Giffords and 19 others was in a state of confusion, anger, and perhaps illness, his actions also must be understood in the larger context of American society. In recent years, we have become not only more divided along political and ideological lines, we seem to have lost to a large degree our commitment to resolving our differences through civil, constructive dialogue. We have allowed our differences to define who we are, rather than our commonalities. For some people, this obsession with difference has led to the use of language that is threatening or even violent itself. When a deranged individual hears calls to use "bullets rather than ballots" or to "take out" or "target" the opposition, or to put those with whom we disagree "in the crosshairs," then he or she, having already lost touch with reality, takes such advice too literally. The more this happens, the more our country feels like those undemocratic, uncivil societies where assassinations, tribal conflict, and oppression by the powerful few are the norm. Certainly we are far from becoming like those places, but we are getting closer, and that should be a source of concern for us all.

The way we use words, the language we use to talk about our differences, are real, and we must hold ourselves responsible for our choice of metaphors. This is especially true in a society that has chosen to allow virtually anyone to obtain a deadly weapon but not require that he or she demonstrate the ability to use such weapons responsibly. It is difficult to reconcile our aspirations to be a civil society when we are also one of the most heavily armed.

Can we restore our commitment to civility, to the messy, hard work of resolving our differences through dialogue and deliberation rather than threats and acts of violence? We certainly must try. We must assure that our homes, schools, places of worship, and community spaces teach and reinforce the use of democratic approaches to address divisive social and political issues. We must equip our citizens with the tools of conflict resolution, mediation, and deliberation. We must bridge our differences with words that can shape creative solutions based on consensus. It will be words, not walls or weapons, that will help us restore a sense of civility and a belief in our capacity to solve our problems in this troubled world. The horror of the shootings in Arizona should strengthen our resolve to come together, face to face and heart to heart, to listen to each other, to honor our differences and affirm our commonalities, to speak the truth and to hold sacred the meaning of our constitutional democracy.

About New Hampshire Listens

New Hampshire Listens is part of the UNH Carsey Institute's commitment to civic engagement. The mission

of NH Listens is to help local communities and the state develop the capacity for civil, informed citizen deliberation of complex policy issues. The organization emphasizes deliberative democratic practices and strengthening the role of direct citizen engagement in the political process.

About UNH

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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Editors and Reporters: The following opinion piece is available from Bruce Mallory, professor of education at the University of New Hampshire and director of New Hampshire Listens.

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